

Carlo Bianchini

Ranganathan and the social role of Bibliography

Among Ranganathan's lesser known and cited titles, two titles are striking for the presence of the term *bibliography*: *Social bibliography or physical bibliography for librarians* (Ranganathan 1952b) and its second edition: *Physical Bibliography for librarians* (Ranganathan 1974).¹

The term *bibliography* is unusual and to some extent curious: unusual among the titles of Ranganathan's works, because it only occurs in the other two volumes devoted to reference tools (Ranganathan and Sundaram 1940; Ranganathan and Sivaraman 1941); curious because, for our subject area, Ranganathan deliberately created a new expression: *Library Science*.

What is the meaning of the expressions *Social Bibliography* or *Phys-*

¹ Ranganathan's volumes dedicated to bibliography are not easily found in Italy, and it has only been possible to consult *Physical bibliography for librarians*; in this work, however, Ranganathan points out that it is the second and most complete edition of *Social bibliography*.

ical Bibliography introduced by Ranganathan? What is the meaning attributed by Ranganathan to *Bibliography*, a very complex and debated term in our disciplines? What is the relationship between *Bibliography* and *Library Science*?

The work *Social bibliography* is part of a family of three works that includes *Social education literature* (Ranganathan 1952a) and *Library Book Selection* (Ranganathan 1966). The connection, at first sight, is unclear and does not help to understand the nature and value of the expression *Social bibliography*.

The starting point for the discussion on the disciplinary structure of Bibliography is its object of study: *the book*. Ranganathan acknowledges that a book is a complex object, an entity made up of three entities, a triad of concepts.

For Ranganathan, a *book as a trinity* is a composite concept. In fact, if the term ‘book’ is considered in absolute terms, it may call to mind one or more ideas, but “the ideas suggested by the term may vary from person to person and even, in the case of one and the same person, from context to context” (Ranganathan 1974, pp. 18–19).

This approach echoes philosophical concepts from Indian culture, according to which every being has a soul (*atma*), a subtle body (*sukshma sarira*) and a heavy body (*sthula sarira*) - which also have correspondence in Western culture where we speak of *spirit*, *psyche* and *body*. Ranganathan develops these concepts and applies them in the bibliographical field, establishing an association between the three philosophical levels and the three components he identifies in the book: to the first concept, the soul, Ranganathan associates the author’s creative idea, i.e. the intellectual content. To the concept of the subtle body, Ranganathan associates the form of a book, and to that of the heavy body, the physical object.

To make it clearer in what sense he uses these concepts, Ranganathan uses some examples: if we say that the *Gita*, the *Bible* or the *Koran* are *seminal* books, we are referring to the spirit and the ideas they convey. The term book in this case indicates the ideas contained

in the book (intellectual content).

When we say that a certain manual is a *lucid* book, full of examples and illustrations, we refer to the style, clarity and simplicity of the language, the consistency between the manner of exposition and the objectives and the target audience, the effectiveness of the examples and images. In this case, the term book is used in the sense of expressive mode and capacity (form).

When we finally say that the books produced by a certain publishing house are of excellent workmanship, the term book refers to the physical aspects that characterise that object, such as paper, ink, binding, type and techniques of illustration, and in general to the physical medium used to convey the idea and its form.

The articulation of the subject area of Bibliography in Ranganathan is based on the distinction of studies that have as their object each entity that constitutes the book.

In identifying the book as a trinity Ranganathan develops an analysis that goes beyond the more common European approach, in which the book is mostly seen as a dual object, as a vehicle of ideas or as a material object (Pensato 2007, p. 24). Ranganathan's approach comes closest to the analysis that led to the publication of the FRBR report (IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records 1998; 2009), and more recently of IFLA LRM (IFLA 2017) within which the entities Work, Expression and Manifestation find a strong correspondence with the meanings of the term identified by Ranganathan.

5.1. *Document bibliography*

According to Ranganathan, “when ‘Bibliography’ is predominantly associated with the soul of books, we call it ‘Document Bibliography’. It may mean a list of embodied macro and/or micro ideas – that is, of books and/or articles in periodicals – on a specialised subject, or on any number or on even all the subjects” (Ranganathan 1974, p. 21).

The expression bibliography can also be used to refer to the process of preparing lists or to the activity required to produce them, which is referred to as “documentation work”. The result of this type of bibliographic work is the *documentation list*, i.e. the enumerative bibliography. The terminological equivalence between enumerative bibliography and documentation list is explicitly stated in *Classified Catalogue Code* (Ranganathan 1964, par. FM4).

The main purpose of enumerative bibliographies is to make available “a list of books known to exist in a certain library or else in a certain field of study - such as a definite period of time, or a specified subject, or a given language, or a certain form of exposition, or an individual author, and so on” (Ranganathan 1974, p. 24).

The content of ideas or, if we prefer, the intellectual content of books is thus the basis of Document Bibliography, which aims to compile lists of resources that share a particular study interest.

Varying the guiding principle that determines the limits of an enumerative bibliography can give rise to numerous types of bibliographies: thus, there are bibliographies by subject (if the principle of selection is a particular subject); bibliographies by language (if the principle is language); bibliographies by form of exposition (e.g. lists of dictionaries, encyclopaedias and theses); national bibliographies, and so on.

5.2. *Economico-bibliographical lists*

Always careful to present each subject matter in a systematic manner, Ranganathan proposes a classification of the bibliographies that is interesting and useful for its clarity and simplicity. Bibliographies are classified as ‘economico-bibliographical lists’, i.e. of bibliographical classes obtained by any of the ten possible agents occupying the different positions of the economic-bibliographical chain that characterises the book from the moment of its production to the moment of

its use. The economico-bibliographic chain – which corresponds well to what Robert Darnton calls “the communications circuit” and uses for a systematic approach to book history (Darnton 1982, p. 68; 2007) – is the one that links the author of a book with the publisher, printer, bookbinder, distributor, reader, library etc.

Ranganathan organises the economico-bibliographical directories according to the link in the economico-bibliographical chain that they take as their object: the *types* of repertory obtained are listed below, together with the name of the *agency* that normally produces that type of repertory and the *characteristic* (facet) shared by the objects included in that repertory:

- Authorial Bibliography. Author. Production of idea and its expressions;
- Printer’s List. Printer. Production of Physique;
- Binder’s List. Binder. Production of Physique;
- Publisher’s Catalogue. Publisher. Distributor of Physique;
- Bibliophilic Bibliography. Bibliophile. Peculiarities in Physique;
- Copyright List. Copyright Authority. Legal Right in the Document;
- Book Selection list. Book Selection Librarian and Book Selection Agency, if any. Distribution of ideas;
- Library catalogue. Library. Distribution of ideas;
- Reading List. Reference librarian and special agencies, if any. Distribution of ideas;
- Source List. Readers and authors. Distribution of ideas.

Thus, for example, an author’s bibliography is based on the ‘author’ link in the communication circuit and the objects that fall within that list share the same origin with respect to the “production of idea and its expressions”; similarly, a list of reading suggestions is produced by the “reference librarian” as a link in the communication circuit and the objects that the bibliography collects and organises share the

same purpose with respect to the “distribution of ideas” (in this case the promotion of reading).

From a descriptive point of view, Ranganathan emphasises that the data of a source to be included in a “bibliography of the existing” (Ranganathan 1974, par. AB62) are the minimum indispensable data for its identification. Usually the data are author, title, date and sometimes the series. In an enumerative bibliography, data on physical aspects may be present, but these are never the predominant object of the bibliography.

5.2. Physical bibliography and Paleobibliography

Ranganathan defines Physical Bibliography as the field of studies that deal only with the physical appearance of books, that is “the gross body or physique of the book” (Ranganathan 1974, p. 26).

Physical bibliography deals with the process of physically producing a book in printed or any other similar form. It is concerned with:

- Paper;
- Type-casting;
- Composition;
- Block Making;
- Printing;
- Layout of the Book and of its pages;
- Binding; and
- New physical forms in which books are now being reproduced by several reprographic methods.

In his vision, physical bibliography can take three different orientations, which correspond to the historical development of studies on these objects:

- the studies for the development of the skills of craftsmen and

- technicians in book production;
- the studies dealing with the authenticity of a book copy, the authenticity of a text (textual criticism) and other similar subjects;
 - the studies of librarians, which deal with the maximum dissemination of the intellectual content contained in a book to any reader.

In the first orientation, interest prevails in the material production techniques of the object, regardless of the ideas that the object conveys. This field of study unites bibliography with many other disciplines of the document (such as Codicology, Palaeography, Diplomatic, Book history, etc.), which deal with the study of the production techniques of papyrus, parchment, paper, inks, writing instruments, etc.

In the second case, on the other hand, the scholar's attention focuses on the text and its authenticity; the interest stems from the desire to reconstruct the original, correct form of a text and it is the basis of studies in textual criticism. It is in this area that the tools to establish the line of transmission of a text, to ascertain the dates of writing or printing, the identification, analysis and study of the variants present in different editions, impressions and issues become essential.

In the second orientation, an extensive knowledge of the first field of study is necessary, as the authenticity of a witness must be ascertained through the analysis of the book's material production process.

This orientation of studies has historically established itself as a very strong disciplinary field, which has taken on its own specific designation. According to Ranganathan, it can be defined Palaeo-Bibliography and can in turn be subdivided into:

- a) Descriptive Bibliography or Analytical Bibliography;
- b) Historical bibliography;
- c) Textual bibliography;
- d) Taxonomic bibliography.

Descriptive Bibliography deals with the study of books as material objects resulting from the mechanical process of printing: it does not often concern itself with the text, and in any case, it never deals it from a critical or literary point of view, and aims to reconstruct the production process of the material object in its entirety.

According to Ranganathan, who explicitly refers to the principles of Fredson Bowers (Bowers 1949; 1968, p. 588; Ranganathan 1974, p. 36 and 32), the objectives of descriptive bibliography are:

- 1) to describe in a standardised manner, according to a formula, a set of books related to the defined field;
- 2) to set up a description of the ideal copy in the said field;
- 3) to list all kind of irregularities, i.e. deviations from the ideal copy;
- 4) to determine the method of production of each form of each volume; and thereby
- 5) to clarify and explain the textual differences between the numerous copies of each book in the set considered; and
- 6) to interpret features bearing on the method of printing and publication of the entire book or any of its parts.

Descriptive bibliography proceeds with the autoptic examination of all existing copies, because the discovery of a single copy with different and particular characteristics may require a complete redoing of the description of the ideal copy.

The studies of descriptive bibliography have two positive effects: the first is the possibility of reconstructing the history of printing and book production, i.e. collecting and organising data for a field of study that can be called Historical Bibliography; the second is the reconstruction of the original texts in the version that came out of the author's hands, a specific field of study of Textual Bibliography.

Ranganathan vigorously defends the importance of this field of bi-

bliographical studies against the critical attacks of those who ‘equate textual criticism with a pedantic exercise and say that it is the latest consequence of a dead tradition that originated in the reconstruction of manuscript texts’. Criticism of the usefulness of textual bibliography studies is only possible if one ignores the complexity of the production process of the printed book and the risks of human error that characterise it: “in the transfer from manuscript to print and from edition to edition there is as much chance for distortion in text as there has been in transfer through a series of manuscripts” (Ranganathan 1974, p. 37)

Palaeo-Bibliography, a plant whose trunk is, according to Ranganathan, descriptive bibliography and whose fruits are historical bibliography and textual bibliography, needs preliminary studies, which investigate and classify the material components of books (such as papermaking, typography, composition, imposition, preliminary pages, extra-textual, colophon, etc.). These studies can be grouped within the framework of *Taxonomic Bibliography*, which thus constitutes the last branch of Palaeo-bibliography (Ranganathan 1974, p. 39).

Although the organisation of the proposed scope of bibliography is interesting, the review might seem to be yet another attempt to systematise bibliographical studies, which is in addition to and should be carefully compared with other better known proposals such as, for example, those of Fredson Bowers (Bowers 1949) and Walter W. Greg (Greg 1939) for the Anglo-Saxon studies, by Rudolf Blum (Blum 1969) for the German studies, by Louise-Noëlle Malclès (Malclès 1963) for the French studies and by Alfredo Serrai for the Italian panorama (Serrai 1988).

In Ranganathan’s approach, the original aspect is to be found elsewhere: it consists in the analysis of the effects of the intersection of the study of the book as a physical object and the first law of librarianship: “books are for use”.

5.3. Social bibliography: from old book to e-book

The disciplinary organisation of Bibliography constitutes a major problem in this field of study and for the neophyte. The phenomenology of the book and the history of studies dealing with individual aspects of the book make it almost impossible to find one's way through the multitude of terms and definitions such as analytical, critical, descriptive, enumerative, material, systematic, historical, taxonomic and textual bibliography (not to mention related terms and disciplines such as book history, printing history, etc.).

The problem emerges in its full drama when the object of study of bibliography is to become a teaching subject; the organic and systematic presentation indispensable for didactic reasons becomes impossible in practice.

This is the reason that led Ranganathan to make a clean slate of the previous terminology and create a new one that would allow him to proceed systematically in the presentation of disciplinary content.

The new terminology is based on three fundamental decisions:

Decision 1

Document Bibliography and Physical Bibliography were first separated out. To avoid the confusion caused by the word 'Bibliography' occurring in both the terms, I grouped the former with Reference Service in the examination scheme and the latter with Book Selection.

Decision 2

Physical Bibliography with bias to Descriptive Bibliography and its associated fields was not necessary for librarians in general. It should be relegated to a course for scholars reconstructing original texts.

Decision 3

The curriculum in Physical Bibliography should be fully biased towards the needs of librarians – to the needs of book selection work, to the promotion of the physique of the books being attractive and comfortable to readers all down the intellectual scale, and to the lay-out of the book. (Ranganathan 1974, p. 63).

Decisions 2 and 3 can be shared in full or only in part; however, they mark an original approach to the curriculum of librarianship and pave the way for Social Bibliography, i.e. the third orientation of physical bibliography that derives from studies on material aspects from the librarians' point of view. They are interested in books being produced in a way that is appealing and useful enough to attract the attention of specialists and any general reader.

Librarians must study physical bibliography with the aim of developing a knowledge that puts them in the best position to choose and recognise the edition of a book that is most suitable for their readers (Ranganathan 1966, pp. 24–25).

In this subject area, the study of librarians has a functional value, which can be traced directly to the first and third laws of library science. The material characteristics of books are analysed in order to realise the main purpose of books: use.

According to Shera:

The importance of the third law, “Every Book Its Reader,” derived from the probability that any book will be discovered by its appropriate readers, is increased in proportion to the numbers who will be attracted to it because of its physical form. The first law emphasizes the importance of intellectual content as the real reason for the existence of the book. But, since the consumption of that intellectual content is not an involuntary act, the reader must be attracted to the book by a compelling physical form. Here, then, is recognition of the importance of the aesthetic element in the social utility of the book. Even more, this law emphasizes the importance of book selection, for a book that has no reader has no social utility, and, as the author dramatically states it, “any book that does not leave the shelf of

a library casts a curse upon the librarian.” Social utility, therefore, is the measure of the success of the individual book as it is symptomatic of the value of the library as an agent in the communication process (Shera 1954, p. 255).

So, the meaning of the expression introduced by Ranganathan in the title of the first work dedicated to Social Bibliography is clear: the study of *Physical bibliography for librarians* can be called “Social bibliography, as the librarians are engaged in developing social well-being through the use of books and for this purpose they socialise books and endeavour to get them used by all members of the society” (Ranganathan 1974, p. 27).

The subdivision proposed by Ranganathan after the analysis of the tasks of Bibliography offers food for thought on our discipline; not in a retrospective sense, but with an eye to the future.

The first consideration stems from the definition of Physical Bibliography “in the proper sense”, the one that takes on the point of view of the craftsmen and technicians of the book: the explicit identification of a field of study that deals with paper, type, typesetting, printing and binding, suggests to broaden one’s gaze and question recent phenomena. This field of interest can be greatly expanded by taking into consideration current production tools such as e-paper, the existence of word-processing and graphic layout programmes, the possibility of self-producing and self-publishing e-books or the existence of e-readers that require a rethinking of apparently outdated concepts such as binding, *mise en page* or the very concept of the page. Binding is a fundamental property of book, which is precisely a set of sheets sewn together. The purpose of the *mise en page* has always been to facilitate the reception of the text, and the codex page was the key to the success of the overcoming of the roll, because it allowed the continuity of the text to be broken down into shorter segments. The functions of these material elements do not disappear in the e-book, but the technical means to perform them change; how much does these changes affect the use of books by

our users?

One more example: book format, so expressive and functional in the old book, practically disappears in the e-book, since the e-reader has constant measurements; in the meanwhile, another type of format appears (that of the e-text), which is related not to the function and type of the intellectual content, but to commercial issues.

Another example of application is the obsolescence of electronic media and formats: who today would be able to easily read a WordStar 2000 file recorded on a 5 ¼ inch mini floppy disk? In this perspective, today the choice of media and formats must be oriented towards well-documented, open, convertible etc. formats.

In light of these novelties, it is not difficult to imagine a broadening of the study interest of physical bibliography from the ancient book to all resources and in particular to the e-book.

The perspective opened up by Ranganathan's definition of Social Bibliography suggests to ask whether these studies have been neglected by librarians in recent years and whether contemporary librarians' lack of awareness of the subject area of social bibliography has not put them in a position to chase after the rapid and profound changes in the bibliographic universe rather than anticipate, promote or *guide* them.

5.4. Social Bibliography and democracy

According to Ranganathan, Bibliography as a discipline that studies the book in its threefold essence must be able to develop itself by turning towards the future and acting in the sphere of "educational democracy", that is the universal right to education.

In the 20th century, the progress of democracy made it possible to develop the political rights of citizens, improve the quality of life, spread the right to health, social equity, and extend citizens' rights to any other sphere of social life. Ranganathan says the field of education

is also no exception:

Democracy in education is one of the outstanding social happenings of the last hundred years. Schools were the first social institutions thrown open to respond to its call. At the call of democracy, library too is being transformed into a social institution [...] library organization itself is introducing, in an informal way, division of functions among libraries. It is charging a few libraries in each country to specialise in the old aristocratic function of giving service to scholars interested in Palaeo-Bibliography. At the same time, it is also promoting a nation-wide network of libraries to discharge the new democratic function (Ranganathan 1974, pp. 42–43)

So, most libraries should undertake the task of studying the relevance of all the physical components of the ‘book’ (paper, typeface, printing, ink layout, etc.) in relation to each one’s ability to promote or slow down the spread of book use in contemporary society, that is to enable the process of socialisation of the book.

Traditional approaches to those components from a historical point of view (as in bibliology studies) or from a technical point of view (printing and publishing) continue to be an important task of bibliography; but librarians also need to take on those material aspects of the book that can ease its use by all. For Ranganathan

the new approach to Physical Bibliography should be towards the book of the future. It should be along the path of making the book an effective tool in self-education and self-entertainment as much for the democracy and for the aristocracy (in the intellectual sense) (Ranganathan 1974, p. 43).

The task of the *Physical Bibliography for Librarians* (that is the title of the 1974 edition) is therefore to analyse the ways and means of making books easily acceptable to the layman and to those in the lowest quartile of the intellectual ladder, and the responsibility for carrying out this task lies with librarians - especially those in profession that do reference service (Ranganathan 1974, p. 45).

5.5 The library as a laboratory for social bibliography

Ranganathan perceives the library as a privileged observatory and laboratory for evaluating which book features are best for users.

Librarians can verify the potential use of books based on their physical characteristics during their daily work, observing the interactions between readers and certain types of books, with reference to their material qualities:

- quality of cover, binding, size, shape, weight and other physical characteristics;
- quality of paper, font, illustrations, page layout and overall aesthetics;
- appropriateness, sequence and design of the parts of the text, such as contents, preface, index – in other words, the layout of the book as a whole;
- balance between text and iconographic apparatus such as maps, photographs, histograms and summary diagrams; and
- availability of alternative physical formats of resources, designed for reasons of economy (e.g. Photostatic and microfilm reproductions), for the needs of specific classes of people (e.g. Braille, large print and audio books) or to improve efficiency and effectiveness in meeting user demands (e.g. electronic formats).

There is a need to promote empirical studies of social bibliography through observation and experimentation; librarians have not yet put enough effort into this issue, and the delay is traceable to the “delay in recognizing the educational and other social functions of libraries” (Ranganathan 1974, p. 47).

The intersection between physical qualities and ease of use proposed by Ranganathan was able to anticipate the studies that over time have dealt with the new physical forms assumed by documents (microforms, audio and video recordings, electronic and online resour-

ces) and that have theoretically justified the double terminological shift from book to document and then from document to resource. The allusion is to studies in the following fields:

- of the *material production* and *readability* of new formats, such as e-readers, e-books, e-paper and new format management programmes for texts;
- of the economic-bibliographical *production cycle* and access to digital resources, through the use of alternative production and publication techniques available to the scientific community (e.g., open access movement);
- of the effective *usability* of digital documents, collected in databases and accessible in real time through the Internet, whether paid or free of charge;
- of the *search tools* for resources, produced by bibliographic agencies (OPAC, Next Generation Catalogue and Discovery tools) or by private agencies, such as search engines (Google, Bing, Yahoo!, etc.);
- the *description* of these new documentary forms in their physical characteristics, which led first to the development of new descriptive models and standards (from FRBR onwards) and then to the evolution of the rules and modes of data representation, with RDA and linked open data.

Insights into social bibliography are thus an example of how the theoretical approach to disciplinary problems not only allows us to systematically frame historically complex fields of study, but also to provide interpretative elements for the development of our discipline.

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Abstract

The term *Bibliography* in a title of one of Ranganathan's works (*Physical Bibliography for Librarians*) is unusual, because it occurs only in two other volumes that Ranganathan dedicates to reference service, and curious, because for the disciplinary field of libraries Ranganathan is famous for having spread the expression *Library science*. The presentation dwells on the meaning of *Social bibliography* and develops it in two directions: the relationship with other disciplines that deal with books, and the analysis of the concept of the book as a trinity consisting of a soul, a subtle body and a gross body. Ranganathan's reflection on the concept of Bibliography leads him to emphasise once again the ever contemporary dimension of the library as a social institution.

Physical Bibliography; Social Bibliography, S.R. Ranganathan

Il termine Bibliography in un titolo di un'opera di Ranganathan (Physical Bibliography for Librarians) è insolito, perché ricorre solo in altre due volumi che Ranganathan dedica al servizio di reference, e curioso perché per l'ambito disciplinare delle biblioteche Ranganathan è famoso per avere diffuso l'espressione Library science. La presentazione si sofferma sul significato di Social bibliography e si sviluppa in due direzioni: il rapporto con le altre discipline che si occupano del libro e l'analisi del concetto di libro come trinità costituita di un'anima, un corpo sottile e un corpo pesante. La riflessione di Ranganathan sul concetto di Bibliografia lo porta a sottolineare ancora una volta la dimensione sempre contemporanea della biblioteca come istituzione sociale.

Bibliografia fisica; Bibliografia sociale; S.R. Ranganathan